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By GEORGE EATON SIMPSON

## Religion and Justice: Some Reflections on the Rastafari Movement\*

SINCE THE BEGINNING of the twentieth century, and perhaps earlier, Jamaicans have been among the blacks in the New World who have identified with Ethiopia because of its biblical symbolism. In the tradition of Ethiopianism, the most frequently cited verse is Psalms 68:31: "Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God." In the first three decades of this century Ethiopianism became known in Jamaica through essays, books, and articles published there and in the United States. Books introduced into Jamaica in the mid-1920s were important in providing the basis for Rastafarian ideology. The first, published in Newark, New Jersey in 1924, was *The Holy Piby*, by Robert Athlyi Rogers; the second, published in Jamaica in 1926, was *The Royal Parchment Scroll of Black Supremacy* by Fitz Balintine Pettersburgh. Leonard Howell drew extensively on the latter book in the work he published in 1935, *The Promised Key*. These publications, together with the emergence of a number of associations whose membership was limited to black persons, are important in tracing the origins of the Rastafarian movement. Other developments which furthered interest in the Ethiopian tradition and which contributed to the appearance of Rastafarianism were the formation of the Universal Negro Improvement Association in Jamaica by Marcus Garvey in 1914 and the coronation of Haile Selassie (Rastafari) as Emperor of Abyssinia in November, 1930.

The exploitation of lower-class individuals in Jamaica has continued since the system of slavery came to an end in 1838. Economic gains, educational opportunity, and civil and political rights have come slowly. In the formative period of the Rastafari movement fifty years ago, the basic struggles of rural Jamaicans were over land, rent, and taxes. These struggles and pressure from the police gave rise to the millenarian visions of the early Rastafarians. The idea of domination by blacks, a prominent aspect of Rastafarian millenarian ideology, may have been an important factor in occasioning the labor uprisings of 1938.<sup>1</sup>

My first impressions of Rastafarians, gained during a visit to Jamaica in 1946, were supplemented by observations during a visit to Jamaica in 1953 and six visits since then. In 1953, Rastafarians belonged to small, autonomous groups that were augmented by persons who attended meetings or sympathized with the sentiments and aims of the movement. At that time, the revivalist movement (Revival, Revival Zion, and Pocomania) had a large

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<sup>1</sup> Robert A. Hill, "Dread History: Leonard Howell and Millenarian Visions in Early Rastafari Religions in Jamaica," *Epoche* 9 (1981): 30-71.

following, particularly among low-income workers, including many who were unemployed or underemployed. Despite similarities in types of organization, holiday celebrations and excursions, and even in ritual procedures, there were important differences between the two movements. Drumming, "rejoicing," "spiritual" dancing, and possession trance, invariably features of revivalism, never occurred in a Rastafari gathering.<sup>2</sup> At that time, ganja (marijuana) was not smoked during Rastafari meetings, and beards and dreadlocks were a less prominent feature of the movement than they became later. Rastafarians were bitter on the racial question<sup>3</sup> and about class differences. The "white man" and the "black traitors" — the politicians, police, clergymen, teachers, landholders, business and professional people, who were said to have misled and mistreated the people — were denounced at every meeting. The revivalists were engrossed mainly in the quest for personal salvation and the satisfactions to be gained from ritual observances.<sup>4</sup> Conversely, Rastafarians were concerned with economic hardship, racial discrimination, and repatriation to Ethiopia. Although many Rastafarians in the 1950s had been involved earlier in some type of revivalism, most had become hostile to the existence of those cults.

Thirty years ago, the Rastafarians I knew held seven basic beliefs: (1) black people were exiled to the West Indies because of their moral transgressions; (2) the wicked white man is inferior to black people; (3) the Jamaican situation is hopeless; (4) Ethiopia is Heaven; (5) Haile Selassie is the Living God; (6) the Emperor of Ethiopia will arrange for expatriated persons of African descent to return to the Homeland; and (7) black people will soon get revenge by compelling white people to serve them. Today, Rastafari is much more heterogeneous than it was in the 1950s. Different subgroups stress different elements of the original creed, but some important modifications are discernible. The death of Haile Selassie has raised significant questions about his role in the movement. Also, there is less emphasis on Ethiopia and more on Pan-Africanism. Likewise, the doctrines concerning "the white man" have undergone some changes.

According to Owens, by 1970-71, "notwithstanding certain statements with apparently racist import, the essence of Rastafarian teaching is that all races are basically equal."<sup>5</sup> Owens asserts that the Rastas' claim that they are especially chosen by God "does not so much signify superiority as dictate a prophetic role which puts them at the service of all nations."<sup>6</sup> Also, Owens reports that the Rastas he knew were willing, despite the crimes of the white race against the world's colored peoples, "to admit that there are good and bad in the white race, just as in the black."<sup>7</sup> His informants insisted that they were not motivated by race hatred, and that anyone who confesses Ras Tafari's divinity is "gladly welcomed into their midst, no matter what the race or

<sup>2</sup> George Eaton Simpson, "Political Cultism in West Kingston, Jamaica," *Social and Economic Studies* 5 (1955): 133-49.

<sup>3</sup> Barry Chevannes, "The Literature of Rastafari," *Social and Economic Studies* 26 (1977): 239-62.

<sup>4</sup> George Eaton Simpson, "Jamaican Revivalist Cults," *Social and Economic Studies* 5 (1956): 321-442.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Owens, *Dread: The Rastafarians of Jamaica* (London, 1982), 60-2.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

color.”<sup>8</sup> Chevannes argues that “it is class interest which makes it possible to transcend race, not, as Father Owens asserts ‘the essence of Rastafari teaching . . . that all races are basically equal.’”<sup>9</sup> In any case, these are, indeed, noteworthy changes in Rastafari doctrine over a period of two decades.

A relatively recent aspect of the Rasta worldview is that of “love and peace,” that is, on being able to love yourself and others, knowing yourself and others, and living in peace with yourself and others.<sup>10</sup> This theme is closely related to a preoccupation with questions concerning identity: Who Am I? or What am I? Forsythe sees this concern on the part of black West Indians as a call for an alternative counterculture “more suitable to the needs of black people in these times.”<sup>11</sup>

Revivalism began to decline in the mid-1950s, and many former revivalists were attracted to Rastafari.<sup>12</sup> During the past three decades, the Ras Tafari movement had grown rapidly, changed considerably, and grown more complex. Adherents and sympathizers have extended through all levels of society. Repatriation to Africa has received somewhat less emphasis as some individuals and subgroups have begun to stress black power and black cultural ascendancy.<sup>13</sup>

Many adherents of Rastafari view the movement as a way of life, a philosophy, and an ethical code. Rastafarian beliefs are reflected in the use of language.<sup>14</sup> In fact, language has been developed into an instrument for defining reality and stating a world view. Faristzaddi comments that Jamaican diction “ranges from the purist, socially respected ‘good’ articulate and well-enunciated Queen’s English to the expressive, socially considered ‘bad’ Creole.”<sup>15</sup> Jamaican patois is hardly comprehensible to persons attuned only to the Queen’s English. Enlarging upon the Jamaican patois, Ras Tafarians call their diction the Iyeric language. They have examined the word/sound structure of Standard English for negative connotations in the spelling and pronunciation of certain words. For example, the word *sincere* includes the syllable *sin*, and is, therefore, changed to *Incerely* or *Icerely*. The word *dedicate* emphasizes the *dead*, and is replaced with the positive word *livicate*. *Appreciate* is changed to *apprecilove* because the *ate* has a *hate* sound.

In Rastafarian language, the pronoun *I* replaces the *me* of Creole speech and takes on special significance. The new “I-words” symbolize “a new perception of self as Man and as nothing less, as subject and not as object.”<sup>16</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Barry Chevannes, “Review of Joseph Owens, *Dread: The Rastafarians of Jamaica*,” *Caribbean Quarterly* 26 (1980): 61-9.

<sup>10</sup> Tracy Nicholas, *Rastafari: A Way of Life* (Garden City, 1979), p. 34.

<sup>11</sup> Dennis Forsythe, “West Indian Culture Through the Prism of Rastafarianism,” *Caribbean Quarterly* 26 (1980): 62-81.

<sup>12</sup> M. G. Smith, Roy Augier, and Rex Nettleford, *The Ras Tafari Movement in Kingston, Jamaica* (Kingston, Jamaica: Institute of Social and Economic Research, University of the West Indies, 1960), p. 18.

<sup>13</sup> Rex Nettleford, *Mirror, Mirror: Identity, Race, and Protest in Jamaica* (Kingston, Jamaica: William Collins and Sangster, 1970), 218-19; George Eaton Simpson, *Black Religions in the New World* (New York, 1978), pp. 305-07; Stephen D. Glazier, “Religion and Contemporary Religious Movements in the Caribbean,” *Sociological Analysis* 41 (1980): 181-83.

<sup>14</sup> Velma Pollard, “Dread Talk — The Speech of the Rastafarian in Jamaica,” *Caribbean Quarterly* 26 (1980): 32-41.

<sup>15</sup> Millard Faristzaddi *Itations of Jamaica and I Rastafari* (New York, 1982).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

For emphasis, the terms *I-and-I* and *I-man* are used as a reminder of the transformation of a non-person into a person, thus assuring "a sense of place, a sense of purpose" to those who have been captives in Babylon.<sup>17</sup> *He* and *she* are eliminated as being "too cold and distant."<sup>18</sup> Instead, one says *that man*, *that woman*, or *the man*, *the woman*, or *that I*.

With the "I and I" symbol, *brethren* becomes *idren* and *daughter* becomes *Iyawata*. Inanimate objects such as fruits are also reaffirmed with the *I* sound. *Banana* includes a negative sound *ban* and is changed to *Iana*, *Jahana*, or *freebana*. *Irie* (pronounced eye-ree) is the ultimate positive. "I and I will come forward soon" means "I and I (I or we) will come back soon." "Last" always becomes "first." *Seen* means *I know* or *I read you*. Words like *deadline*, *deadend*, and *deadlock* are avoided in Iyaric; the word *deadline* is changed to *lifeline*. In Rastafari culture, to face deadlines is to plunge oneself toward death.<sup>19</sup>

Among other words included in the Iyaric glossary compiled by Birhan<sup>20</sup> are:

*Babylon*: The corrupt establishment of Western civilization — capitalism and imperialism

*Caesar*: Money

*Dread*: Fearlessness in the face of obstacles that confront the Rastafari

*Downpressor*: Oppressor

*Downstroy*: To pull down and destroy

*Heavens*: The brain

*Irate*: Create

*Icall*: Recall

*Iceive*: Receive

*Iclare*: Declare

*Iditate*: Meditate

*Itation*: Meditation

*Ital*: Pure; wholesome

*Overstand*: Understand

*Zion*: Africa and Ethiopia; the home of the African to which the Rastafarians seek repatriation.

In short, the Rastafarians believe that a word can kill or cure and that every word carries a vibration. Every word has a history. Words should never be used unthinkingly.

Today the underlying militancy of Rastafarianism is revealed in the concept of Babylon. Jamaica's present plight is attributed to the aftermath of British colonialism; the industrial power of the United States; and the influence of the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>21</sup> Rome symbolizes the continuation of Babylon's power, "the headquarters of the church-state coalition which has exercised dominion over mankind for the last two millenia."<sup>22</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Rex Nettleford, "Introduction," *Dread: The Rastafarians of Jamaica* by Joseph Owens (London, 1982).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Nicholas, op. cit., p. 39.

<sup>20</sup> Iyawata Farika Birhan, "Iyaric Glossart," in Millard Faristzaddi, ed., *Itations of Jamaica and I Rastafari* (New York, 1982).

<sup>21</sup> Chevannes, op. cit.

<sup>22</sup> Owens, op. cit., p. 70.

A theme emphasized recently by Rastafarians is the concept of nature. Here the ideal seems to be that of a nonindustrial society, one in which only natural, unprocessed foods with no additives are eaten, hair and beards are uncut, ganja as the "holy herb" is consumed in various ways, and life is unhurried. For more than twenty years, Rastafari has played an important role in the development of Jamaican popular music, vocal and instrumental. Reggae songs contain caustic social commentary, but they also extol Ras Tafari, Jamaican hereos, freedom, and ganja.<sup>23</sup> Much of the poetry and many of the essays written by Rastafarians deal with the history and culture of Africa and the awareness of African identity is a main theme.<sup>24</sup> The visual arts have been transformed through the symbolism and imagery of Rasta painters and this influence has extended into the arts of ceramics and woodcarving. Similarly, the dance and theater have been influenced by Rasta vision. All in all, Nettleford calls the Rasta transformation of the arts "a fantastic achievement."<sup>25</sup>

According to Campbell, by the mid-1970s Rastafari had become the culture (or counterculture) of a sizeable percentage of the Jamaican population.<sup>26</sup> Churchgoers spoke of the liberation of Africa and denounced the eating of pork. Rastafarians had spread the word about *Ital* (pure) food, condemning the preservatives used in food processing and urging self-sufficiency. The movement challenged the distinctions made on the basis of color and class, as well as between town and country. At the same time, another development had been occurring.

Whereas earlier the movement was regarded as subversive and considered as a force to be eliminated, Nettleford says that the wider society has come to have greater understanding of the Rastafarian vision, resulting in "tactical accommodation if not widespread acceptance."<sup>27</sup> While this is occurring, there is some evidence that Rastas themselves are engaged in a process of reluctant accommodation to Jamaican society.

Owens found that Rastafarians basically oppose violent revolution but maintain that the King must one day wage "a fearsome battle to establish his sovereignty once and for all."<sup>28</sup> This belief does not mean that Rastafarians are to remain passive and non-resistant in the face of the injustices of society, but quite a number say they will fight only when the King asks them to do so.

In addition to Rastafari in Jamaica, the movement has an international dimension. Even before Haile Selassie was dethroned, many Rastafarians spoke of the need for a new government in Ethiopia and associated themselves with the movement for national liberation in Africa. A Zulu group translated a Rasta song, *By the Rivers of Babylon*, and used it as a rallying call. A prominent singer, the late Bob Marley, was awarded a Third World Peace

<sup>23</sup> Leonard Barrett, *The Rastafarians: Sounds of Dissonance* (Boston, 1977), p. 194; Horace Campbell, "Ras Tafari: Culture and Resistance," *Race and Class* 22 (1980): 1-22.

<sup>24</sup> Howard Johnson, "Introduction," in Trevor Fitz Henley, *Boy in a Landscape: A Jamaican Picture* (Gordon Town, Jamaica: Ambasa-Judah Press, 1980), pp. 4-6.

<sup>25</sup> Nettleford, op. cit., p. xi.

<sup>26</sup> Campbell, op. cit.

<sup>27</sup> Nettleford, op. cit., p. xviii.

<sup>28</sup> Owens, op. cit., p. 207.

Medal presented by Senegal on behalf of all the African countries,<sup>29</sup> and in 1980 he was invited to perform at the Zimbabwe independence celebration.

Rastafarian culture has spread throughout the eastern Caribbean. In Dominica, a variant of Rastafari called The Dreads has been banned by the government. More than 400 Rastafarians were involved in the New Jewel Movement in Grenada which overthrew the dictatorship of Eric Gairy. Rastafarian beliefs have spread to Martinique and Guadeloupe and to London and Paris where the art, music, poetry, and philosophy of Ras Tafari have become well-known. Campbell writes about the explosion of Rasta culture in Antigua, Barbados, St. Thomas, St. Kitts, Trinidad, and Guyana.<sup>30</sup> He mentions also that a group of young Rastas "from Montserrat to Nevis and from St. Vincent to Anguilla" opposed selling off the islands of the Grenadines (a chain of small islands between St. Vincent and Grenada) to private developers.<sup>31</sup>

Rastafari is not a united movement.<sup>32</sup> Many of the brethren gather in small, informal bodies and are not affiliated with organized groups. In the late 1970s, Rastafarians began to form an island-wide organization, the Divine Theocratic Government of Rastafari Selassie I. Headed by a council of fifteen men, this organization had some success in achieving unity of purpose and direction, but conflicts of interest arose between leaders from Kingston and those from some of the rural areas. As Nicholas comments, some Rastafarians see themselves as fighters against oppression, but others believe that peaceful living through theocracy will bring about a victory against evil.<sup>33</sup>

Important theological differences exist among the Rastafari. Some Rastafarians worship regularly in the Temples of Rastafari located throughout Jamaica; others worship in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church of Garveyite origin. The Church does not worship Haile Selassie. Also, the Church regards the Rastas as a heathen element in Jamaica and the Rastas view the Church as part of Babylon and its oppression. The future of Rastafari as an organized force in Jamaican life will depend largely on the resolution of these and other conflicts.

Rastafarianism can be seen as an individual and collective movement for the acquisition of status for blacks in colonial societies. Within Rasta communities and within individual Rastas this struggle aims to regain the sense of personal worth and dignity which society has denied. This attempt to gain recognition and status so far has occurred mainly at the individual level. But many observers believe that this struggle has to be fought out at the collective level as well.

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<sup>29</sup> Nicholas, op. cit., p. 74.

<sup>30</sup> Horace Campbell, "The Rastafarians in the Eastern Caribbean," *Caribbean Quarterly* 26 (1980): 42-61.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> George Eaton Simpson, *Religious Cults of the Caribbean: Trinidad, Jamaica, and Haiti* (Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico: Institute of Caribbean Cultures, University of Puerto Rico, 1980) pp. 224-28.

<sup>33</sup> Nicholas, op. cit., p. 47